The Supreme Jurisprudent and the meaning of power in Iran[1]

Abstract

The article charters the trajectory of power in Iran, from Ayatollah Khomeini to the current "Supreme Leader" in Iran, Ali Khamenei. It pays particular attention to the way power, legitimacy and sovereignty have been codified and enforced since the revolution of 1979 with reference to invented Islamised norms, imagery, institutions and symbols.

Khomeini – Power – Khamenei – Iran – Islamism - Revolution

In the revolutionary process that delivered the Islamic Republic, something rather novel happened in Iran. For the first time in world history, a state endowed itself with both a republican mandate and a religious, clerically centred sovereignty. The leadership of the Supreme Jurisprudent (*Velayat-e faqih*), theorised by Khomeini in exile in Najaf in the 1970s, is at the heart of this institutional make up of the Iranian state which has endured the vicissitudes of domestic revolts, invasion, sanction and threats of war for over four decades now. In this short essay I will disentangle some of the foundations of power that underlie the system of the Velayat-e faqih. I will show how in the build-up of the post-revolutionary state the nature of power of the faqih changed from a religious-theological ideal-type to a pragmatist-realist one. If Ayatollah Khomeini was a revolutionary cleric who brought about sudden and radical change in Iran and beyond, his successor Khamenei appears as a pragmatist "prefect" of Khomeini's contested political legacy, whose foundations of power are by far more sober and formalised than those of the leader of the Iranian revolution.

A (short) genealogy of the Supreme Jurisprudent

[1] Some sections of the article have been adopted from Arshin Adib-Moghaddam (ed.), *A Critical Introduction to Khomeini* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), introduction.

The history of the institutionalisation of the role of the Supreme Jurisprudent has been written by many scholars.[2] According to the detailed study of Asghar Shirazi, for instance, the governmental system in Iran can be best described as a hierocracy which 'has separated itself from the traditional religious foundations of legitimation which it had originally emphasised, without finding new foundations which it can convincingly define and relate to the shari'a, that is to say, to Islam'.[3] Shirazi is right to argue that there has been a shift in the way power is legitimated in Iran, but he (and many others) adheres to a problematic dichotomy between religion (Islam) and modernity when he argues that the 'only relationship the legalists have been able to create between their conception of Islam and the products of modern civilisation is reactive.'[4] At least since the emergence of the revivalist discourse of Islam in the late 19th century, pioneered by luminaries such as Muhammad Abduh and Jamal-ad din Afghani (Asadabadi), modernities and Islams have been engaged in an intense dialectic, which has not been resolved in favour of one or the other. Muslim societies have modernised Islam and Islamicised modernity exemplified by the globalisation – institutional and ideational – of Islamic symbols in contemporary metropolis such as Paris, London, Berlin and New York. There has never been a single, presumably western modernity separate from other discourses, as much as there has never been a monolithic, Unitarian Islam unaffected by other events in global history, whether in Iran or elsewhere:[5] Islams are as hybridised by global history as any other ideational systems.

If anything, the contemporary history of Iran is a very good example for overlapping temporalities/modernities that are constantly competing with each other (Islamic, Persian, western, Shi'i, Zoroastrian etc.). The Shah tried to resolve this never-ending dialectic in favour of a Persianised temporal space. His decision to change the Islamic solar *hejr*a calendar into an imperial one in 1971 is emblematic for this Persian-centric ideology that his state espoused. Suddenly, Iran was in the year 2535 based on the presumed date of the foundation of the Achaemenid dynasty, a brazen effort to create a new historical space and meaning for Iran that was not centred on the Islamic *hejra* calendar.

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[2] See among others Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

[3] Asghar Shirazi, *The Constitution of Iran: Politics and the State in the Islamic Republic*, trans. John O' Keane (London: I.B. Tauris, 1997), p. 304.

[4] Ibid., p. 300

[5] See further Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *What is Iran? Domestic politics and international relations in five musical pieces* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

After all, in the political imagination of the Shah, Iranians were meant to be first and foremost "Aryan" and racially different from the "Semitic" Arabs and "their" Islamic history.[6] The Islamic Republic reversed these efforts and re-Islamicised the temporal space onto which *their* Iran was pasted. At the time of writing Iran is in the year 1402, following the solar *hejra* calendar which begins on the vernal equinox in accordance with astronomical calculations. Consequently, the Iranian New Year (*Nowrouz,* literally "new day"), which is replete with Zoroastrian symbolism, always falls on the March equinox. At the same time the first year is fixed around the migration to Medina of the prophet Muhammad in 622 CE. The point of this short foray into the way "Irans" have been dated is to show that the idea of the country and the corresponding invention of identities for Iranians are not processed in a vacuum. The history of the country is as contested and hybrid as that of any other.

This hybridity manifests itself in the institution of the Supreme Jurisprudent as well. The idea of the faqih as a central institution of the state was invented within the ideational fabric undergirding contemporary notions of the meaning of Iran and how the country should be governed. Therefore, the idea of the Velayat-e faqih is an expression of the historical vicissitudes that enveloped the historical consciousness of an influential segment of the clerical strata of society; it cannot be treated merely as an invention of Khomeini's politics, for he himself was the product of the historical circumstances enveloping him and the educational influences that shaped his understanding of the realities in Iran and the world. Consequently, the concept of the Velayat-e faqih is replete with diverse residues of Iran's intellectual trajectories.

For instance, one finds strong affiliation with platonic-Islamic philosophy in the idea of the Supreme Jurisprudent reflecting Khomeini's fascination with Ibn Arabi and classical Islamic philosophy in general. Terms such as reason, justice, wisdom and oppression are central to the political discourse of Khomeini throughout his life. They are indicative of his education in *hekmat* (literally wisdom), and '*irfan* (gnosis), taught to him by luminaries such as Mirza Mohammad Ali Shahabadi (d. 1950), a scholar of the classical Islamic philosophy of Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Ibn Arabi and Nassir al-Din Tusi.[7] Accordingly, in *kashf al-asrar*, his

[6] See further Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *The International Politics of the Persian Gulf: A cultural genealogy* (London: Routledge, 2006).

[7] For a detailed account of the linkage between Ibn Arabi and Khomeini, see Latife Reda Ali, *Khomeini's Discourse of Resistance: The discourse of power of the Islamic revolution* (PhD thesis, London: School of Oriental and African Studies 2012).

first major publication, Khomeini refers to the establishment of the 'Virtuous City' which denotes an ideal and just polity. This concept entered political theory in Iran via the Platonic tradition in general and the classical Islamic philosophy of Farabi in particular. Such a utopian "ideal order", under the aegis of Islam, was exactly what Khomeini and his followers were striving for – hence the high costs that this "heavenly" project extracted from Iranian society.

Khomeini was an ardent student of philosophy, in particular the concept of *vahdat al-vojud* (unity of existence) and *tawheed* (unity of God) conceptualised by Ibn Sina and Ibn Arabi and, at a later stage, an enthusiastic lecturer on related themes in the seminaries of Qom.[8] The political aspects of this philosophical tradition in Iran that must have made the greatest impact on Khomeini, judging from the terms and methods permeating his discourse, are the quest for the ideal human being or *insane-e kamel* in Ibn Arabi's words. The development of this ideal human being must be the prime objective of governance of the community and the leadership of the Supreme Jurisprudent, whose "exalted" position is not entirely remote from the "philosopher-king" in the platonic tradition. So convinced was Khomeini of the superiority of classical Islamic philosophy that he urged the former leader of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachov, in a letter delivered to him in 1988, to study the Peripatetic philosophy of Farabi and Ibn Sina, the mysticism of Ibn Arabi, the transcendental philosophy of Mulla Sadra and the Ishraqi theosophy of Sohrawardi.[9] Gorbachov politely declined but according to one Russian scholar, the message was widely distributed in the Soviet Union in the period of its disintegration in 1989-90.[10]

But it was not only his educational experience that shaped the idea of the *faqih* that Khomeini envisaged. Throughout his life he was adamant to empower the clerical class in Iran. Especially after the death of Iran's main *marja-e taghlid* (source of emulation, highest clerical rank amongst the Shi'i), Ayatollah Boroujerdi, in 1961, Khomeini increasingly agitated against the quietist tradition in Shi'i Islam embarking on a systematic effort to politicise Iran's clerical establishment. This socialisation of Khomeini into a senior cleric whose world-view emerged relatively independent from competing secular institutions was possible because of a functioning institutional infrastructure that aided and abetted the

[8] Baqer Moin, *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), pp. 40 ff.

[9] Ibid., pp. 274-276.

[10] See Alexander Knysh, "*Irfan* Revisited: Khomeini and the legacy of Islamic mystical philosophy", *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 64, No. 4 (1992), p. 652 (footnote 81).

clerical class in Iran at least since the Safavid dynasty (1502-1736), which established Shi'i Islam as the country's main national narrative.

It was under the Safavids, and in particular during the rule of Shah Abbas I (1571-1629), when the idea of Imamite jurisprudence in the Twelver-Shi'i tradition was institutionalised in the burgeoning *madrasas* and other educational and civic institutions sponsored by the state which were increasingly populated by senior Shi'i scholars recruited from all over the Muslim world and in particular from Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Chief among them was Muhaqiq al-Karaki (also al-Thani, d. 1533), a pivotal clerical personality that readily carried the torch of the state-sponsored Shi'ism institutionalised during that period. In his widely disseminated study, *Refuting the Criminal Invectives of Mysticism (Mata'in al Mufrimiya fi Radd al-Sufiya),* Al-Karaki established one of the most powerful refutations of the Sufi tradition in Iran and set the jurisprudential guidelines for the predominant authority of the jurist based on the Imamite succession.[11] As a consequence, the *usuli* (rationalist) school of Shi'i Islam increasingly dominated the seminaries and pushed back the followers of the traditionalist (*akhbari*) paradigm. Al-Karaki and other influential clerics emphasised the power of *ijtihad* or dialectical reasoning and made a strong case in favour of the leadership of *mujtahids* whose divine decrees would be emulated (*taqlid*) by their followers.[12] As such Al-Karaki's reinvention of a Shi'i orthodoxy based on a religious hierarchy dominated by a supreme jurist can be seen as one of the main precursors to Khomeini's idea of the *Velayat-e faqih* or the rule of the Supreme Jurisprudent.[13]

Ultimately, in truly modern fashion, Khomeini the politician and revolutionary eclipsed the abstract, contemplative and partially "non-Islamic" notions permeating the philosophy of the classical philosophers in favour of a highly utilitarian, theological and interest based interpretation. In the dialectic between philosophy and politics, Khomeini opted for the latter,

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[11] See further Rula Jurdi Abisaab, *Converting Persia: Religion and Power in the Safavid Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), p. 24. For Karaki's writings see Muhaqiq al-Karaki, *Jameal maqasid vol.2* (Qum: Ahlol Bayt Publication, 1365 [1986]).

[12] See further Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism: The sources of esotericism in Islam* (trans. David Streight), (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), pp. 138-139.

[13] For a full history of the idea of *marjaiyat,* see Abdulaziz Abdulhussein Sachedina, *The Just Ruler in Shi'ite Islam: The Comprehensive Authority of the Jurist in Imamite Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); and Linda Walbridge, *The Most Learned of the Shi'a: The Institution of the Marja' Taqlid* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), in particular pp. 1-12.

especially in the 1960s when he focused his activities more stringently on combating the policies of the Shah. As such, it is not too far-fetched to argue that Ibn Arabi's emphasis on sainthood (*vilaya*) and his designation of the *vali* as a friend of God whose practices and devotion to knowledge of God enable him to claim succession to the Prophet, informed Khomeini's theory of *Velayat-e faqih*.

But at the same time Ibn Arabi and the Sufi tradition inspired by him would have rejected the positivistic (or ideological) certainty that Khomeini attached to the position of the *vali-e faqih* in favour of an individual path towards the "ideal human being".[14] Not unlike other Islamists of his generation – Muhammad Ala Mawdudi in the subcontinent, Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb in Egypt, Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir al-Sadr in Iraq and others – Khomeini forged a particularly ideological interpretation of the role of Islam in politics and society that was imbued with political violence and social intolerance. Confined were the abstract and contemplative ideas of the classical philosophers which were thought during the heydays of Muslim empires when Islam was not a contested ideational commodity. Ibn Sina, Farabi and Ibn Arabi did not have to proclaim Islam as the solution at every twist and turn of their discourse exactly because their Muslim identity, and the Islamic legitimation of the polity they lived in, was not threatened.[15] The era of the post-colonial nation-state in the Muslim world changed all that. It turned Islam into a contested ideational system and a space of immense contestation. Islam, being Muslim, after all is also about identity, whether it is individual, religious, and imperial or since the break-up of the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th century, national. As such, the organisational outfit of infant nation-states, as opposed to the organically "Islamic" confessional empires of yesterday, gave centre stage to issues of power, governance and sovereignty in a way that was not apparent before. Enter the idea of a centralized state that would turn Islam at once into a source of legitimacy, sovereignty and national ideology. In short, in the 20th century an Islam extended its purview into unchartered territories exactly because it was pasted by Khomeini and others onto the fabric of the modern nation-state, a secular structure for which it has proven to be a loose fit.

In general, the political discourse of Khomeini was premised on two central themes: a particular emphasis on a strong state and a profound focus on independence from foreign

[14] See further William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knoweldge: Ibn Al-Arabi's metaphysics of imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

[15] On Farabi's political thought see Muhsin S. Mahdi, *AlFarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

influences. He was under the firm impression that in the quest for a stable state and independence especially from "America", the role of Islam would be pivotal. Hence, at least in theory, the Supreme Jurisprudent resembles a Hobbesian Leviathan whose purpose it is to secure and stabilise the state and to ensure the Islamicity of the system. In order to entrench his political power, Khomeini equipped the state with a dual legitimacy: religious and popular. More specifically, he argued that in the absence of the leadership of the Twelfth Imam of the Shi'i, the so called "occultation era", only the "just jurists" are entitled to the permanent guardianship and governance of Muslim societies. Indeed, from the perspective of Khomeini no government can be deemed 'reasonable' if it is not based on the 'divine law of god' executed by a 'just and wise governor' who would ensure the stability of the state in the absence of the superior leadership of the Imams.[16] As he wrote in *Kashf al-asrar*, undoubtedly with Reza Shah in mind:

> Reason can never accept that a man who is no different from others in outward or inward accomplishments, unless he is maybe inferior to them, should have his dictates considered proper and just and his government legitimate, merely because he has succeeded in gathering around himself a gang to plunder the country and murder its people.[17]

Given that absolute sovereignty and absolute legitimacy is attributed to God and his divine law (*shariah*),[18] and given that only the *mujtahideen* and - *primus inter pares* - the Supreme Jurisprudent, have acquired superior knowledge of the political and religious criteria to establish an Islamic government, it is them who should be in charge of the guardianship of society.[19] In fact, they would lead the *umma* as representatives of the 'infallible imams'. Hence, any other form of governance is deemed 'usurping'[20] and an interference in the sovereignty of God.[21] The Iranian Leviathan doesn't merely wield a sceptre, then, he was equipped by Khomeini with a distinctly other-worldly sovereignty that has given the office of the faqih disturbingly arbitrary powers which have been recurrently challenged both by other institutions of the state, and the combatant Iranian civil society.

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[16] Ruhollah Khomeini, *Shou'n va Ekhtiyarate Valiye Faqih* (Tehran: Vezarat-e Ershade Islami, 1986), pp. 29-30.

[17] Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution I*, p. 169.

[18] Ruhollah Khomeini, *Al Makaseb al Muharrama*, vol. ii, (Tehran: The Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Work, 1995), p.160.

[19] Khomeini, *Sahifeh Nour,* vol. x, p. 308

[20] Khomeini, *Sahifeh Nour,* vol. xi, p. 403.

[21] Khomeini, *Al Makaseb al Muharrama,* vol. ii, p. 160.

The Faqih and his Discontents

The clerical mandate to rule, which was inscribed so vehemently in the Iranian constitution by Khomeini and his followers, was never without its critics. At the beginning of the revolution leading Shi'i authorities in Iraq, namely Ayatollahs Khoi and Sistani, and Lebanon, for instance Ayatollah Fadlallah, and in Iran itself in particular Ayatollah Shariatmadari and Qomi, were opposed to the direct clerical leadership of the state espoused by Khomeini and his followers. My colleague Ali Rahnema meticulously demonstrates how at the beginning of the revolution there was no real consensus on the inclusion of the faqih between the various forces comprised in the Provisional Government and the Revolutionary Council which was mandated to draft the constitution.[22] Yet, in the final analysis, Khomeini remained the point of fixation of the masses and most revolutionary parties— when he manoeuvred, the nascent political system tilted towards his direction. Whereas the liberal and leftist factions were increasingly paralysed in their decision-making and harassed by their Islamist competitors, the elevated position of Khomeini provided him and his followers with the opportunity to inscribe the rule of the Supreme Jurisprudent into the political process and to put the faqih-centred constitution of an "Islamic Republic" to a referendum which was approved by 98.2% of the electorate. Khomeini was actively positioned, and positioned himself, at the helm of the state until his death in 1989 and his formal and informal powers far outweighed that of any other institution of the Islamic Republic.

Despite the clear absence of a clerical consensus about the role of the faqih, at the beginning of the revolution Khomeini was flanked by leading sources of emulation (*marja-e taghlid*) such as Ayatollahs Golpayegani, Montazeri, Beheshti, Mar'ashiye-Najafi, Mousavi-Ardebili, Taleghani and others. In contrast, currently the ranks of the major Ayatollahs surrounding the successor of Khomeini, Ali Khamenei, appear scattered, if not depleted. It is too farfetched to imply that 'today, there is not a single grand ayatollah in power' as Olivier

[22] Ali Rahnema, 'Ayatollah Khomeini's Rule of the Guardian Jurist: From Theory to Practice', in Arshin Adib-Moghaddam (ed.), *A Critical Introduction to Khomeini* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

Roy does,[23] but it is true that Ali Khamenei does not possess the religious legitimacy originally associated with the position of the faqih. His power is religiously stunted; it does not reach into the labyrinthine spaces in Qom (and much less into the *howzas* of Najaf, Karbala and Kazimiyah) which are guarded by senior Ayatollahs who operate largely independent from the politics of Tehran. If in 1979 state power in Iran was infused with a distinctly utopian Islamic content, revolutionary fervour, personified by the charismatic and populist leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini; today power in Iran is professionalised, sober and pragmatic. If Khomeini was the philosopher-imam with the aura of an uncompromising clerical revolutionary whose ideas were steeped in the metaphysics of the imamate tradition in Iran, Khamenei seems like a technocratic CEO of an oppressive multinational company. Whereas Khomeini took full advantage of his powerful position that rested both on his political role as the revolutionary point of fixation and as a religious leader, Khamenei has relied by far more on the political power that the office of Supreme Leader bestows upon him and the violence of the matured security institutions that he fostered. If Khomeini could afford to move radically, Khamenei tends to tip-toe. Khomeini ↔ revolution ↔ imam ↔ radical change; Khamenei ↔ consolidation ↔ prefect ↔ conservatism.

Hence, the power of the state in Iran, devoid of its original revolutionary fervour, reveals itself in an increasingly secularised space where religious norms follow realist policies and where the interest of the system supersedes consensus building among the religious authorities of the country. In 1979, Iran produced a revolutionary-utopian Islam, today it is producing a realist-technocratic one, that has largely lost its appeal even among former supporters. Khomeini himself consciously contributed to this process shortly before his death when he favoured Khamenei over Ayatollah Montazeri as his successor as *vali-e faqih* which necessitated a central constitutional amendment in 1989.

The Iranian constitution stipulates that the Supreme Jurisprudent must be 'brave', 'upright', 'pious' an expert of Islam with an excellent understanding of current affairs and the requirements of leading the Islamic state. Chapter 1 clarifies the "fundamental principles" of that leadership further. In Article 2 it is emphasised that the Islamic system in Iran is based on the principle of 'continued *ijtehad* by qualified jurists.' Article 5 adds that the faqih (or a council of jurists, *fuqaha*) has the legitimate right to rule during the occultation of the 12th imam of the Shi'i (Imam Mahdi). Article 57 sets out that the vali-e faqih is responsible for the

[23] Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*, trans. Carole Volk (Cambridge , MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 180.

supervision of the three branches of the government and article 110 specifies that this supervisionary role includes appointing the jurists to the Guardian Council and the highest judicial authority, holding the position of commander in chief with wide ranging powers to appoint and dismiss the highest echelons of the military leadership, and confirming the Presidency. The power of the vali-e faqih to appoint six jurists of the 12 member Guardian Council is particularly central because the Council is mandated to veto bills by the legislature if they do not "comply" with Islamic tenets (as interpreted by the Council's members). The Guardian Council also vets the candidates for the Presidency, the Parliament (*majlis*) and the Assembly of Experts which is composed of *Mojtaheds* and which is charged with supervising, electing and removing the Supreme Leader, if he proves to be unfit for office.

More importantly, before the constitutional amendments of 1989, article 109 of the constitution set out that the faqih had to hold the rank of *marja-e taghlid* or source of emulation, the highest clerical rank in the Shi'i hierarchy. At the time of his appointment as Khomeini's successor, Khamenei was a mid ranking *hojatol-islam va muslimin*. As President of the Islamic Republic he had demonstrated political competency, the second pillar of the requirement for the faqih, but he was not a leading Ayatollah, his religious credentials did not match those of Ayatollah Montazeri, the designated successor to Khomeini. In order to pave the way for his ascendancy to the role of the Supreme Leader the requirement of *marjaiyat* had to be dropped from the constitution. This was a main factor for the transformation of the discourse of power in Iran which, by necessity, tilted away from its original religious-revolutionary emphasis towards a rather more this-worldly and pragmatist syntax.

From the Imam to the Prefect

There is no suggestion here that the power exercised by Khomeini was inherently religious. True, the way it was legitimated was firmly rooted in an Islamicised discourse with distinctly Shi'i connotations, but that doesn't mean that power itself can ever be religious or metaphysical. Power is secular. It is exactly physical and material, steeped in the dialectical reciprocity between ruler and ruled. In power there is no mediating otherworldly figure exactly because power is exercised immediately, it is not remote; it is penetrative, real and

promiscuous.[24] Therefore what shifted was not the secularity of power itself, but the religious claim according to which the sovereignty of the faqih was legitimated. This change was necessary, if not inevitable because of the lack of the religious credentials of Khamenei at the time of his appointment as Supreme Leader in 1989. In accordance with this circumscribed religious legitimacy and the constitutional amendments thus implemented, Khamenei was forced to accept that the institution of the *marja* has to retain its relative independence from the office of the *faqih*, certainly in the domestic realm in Iran where it has to compete with the powerful clerics concentrated in Qom. Accordingly, Khamenei acknowledges on his official webpage the presence of enough *Mojtaheds* in Iran who can delegate the religious affairs of pious Muslims in the country without impingement by him. 'Therefore those who insist that I publish risalah [practical rulings] should pay attention', he emphasises. 'This is why I refuse the responsibility of being marj'a. Thanks to Allah, there are others. Then, it is not needed.' At the same time, Khamenei claims *marjaiyat* in international affairs. According to him the situation outside of Iran is different:

> What is the reason? It is because, if I do not burden myself with it, [the marjaiyat] will be lost. The day, on which I feel they – the mujtahids who are available in Qom ... can afford its burden outside Iran as well, I also go away. Today, I accept the request of Shias outside [of] Iran, as there is no alternative. *It is, like other cases, of necessity*. However, regarding inside Iran, there is no need. The Holy Imam-e Asr [Twelfth Imam of the Shi'i believed to be in occultation] protects and witnesses hawzahs, supports great scholars and guides marjas and people here. I ask Allah to make this phase a blessed one for the Iranian nation as well.[25]

The emphasis on pragmatism is apparent here. Apart from the symbolic last sentence, Khamenei legitimates his *marjaiyat* in international affairs mainly through pragmatism: He "has to do it" because as the head of the state he has privileged access to the necessary

[24] See further Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *On the Arab Revolts and the Iranian Revolution: Power and resistance today (*London: Bloomsbury, 2013, forthcoming).

[25] 'Biography'. Available at <http://www.leader.ir/langs/en/index.php?p=bio> [accessed 21 March 2013], emphasis added. In order to explain this particular issue further the following section is added:

> The Leader's refusal of the responsibility of becoming marji' for the people in the Islamic Republic of Iran, does not mean that the people inside the country are not allowed to follow him as a marji'. Consequently, multitudes of letters containing questions about religious issues come from inside the country and from abroad. Besides, a very large number of the noble people in Iran have selected the Supreme Leader as their marji'. There was a pressing in addition to the constant pleading by many great figures.

resources. If he doesn't do it, Khamenei seems to claim, the leadership of the Shi'i will be lost to others outside of Iran because 'there is no alternative' as he puts it. The decision had to be made by 'necessity' in order to safeguard the interest (*maslahat*) of the umma in general and 'the Iranian nation' in particular. Khamenei has seemed to be aware, quite from the outset, that he was appointed out of necessity, not out of preference; that he was the pragmatic option. As he declared upon his inauguration in 1989:

> I am an individual with many faults and shortcomings and really a minor seminarian. Yet, a responsibility has been placed on my shoulders and I will use all my capabilities and all my faith in the almighty in order to be able to bear this heavy responsibility.[26]

Of course, the state used its privileged access to the instruments of discipline and punishment whenever necessary, despite seemingly humble declarations that Khamenei would respect the *marjaiyat* of the senior Ayatollahs. His stand-off with Grand Ayatollah Montazeri which came to the heed in 1997 is a good example. Montazeri repeatedly questioned the religious credentials of Khamenei and in 1997 published an open letter challenging his religious qualifications to rule as Supreme Leader. Subsequently he was put under house arrest until January 2003 when he was allowed to resume his classes on fiqh (Islamic theology) in Qom.

Yet at the same time and despite occasional campaigns to project his authority, Khamenei has had to tip toe around the clerical establishment in Iran; he could never really afford to provoke the higher echelons of the clerical hierarchy in the way Khomeini occasionally dared to. It is interesting, for instance, that Khamenei did not facilitate the house arrest of Ayatollahs Sa'anei and Dastgheib, even when they loudly supported the opposition during the heydays of the reformist "Green movement" in 2009. When Khamenei went to Qom to a muted response by the clerical establishment, Dastgheib challenged his authority from Shiraz in a strikingly forthright manner. According to him, the power of the Supreme Leadership had to be confined if the person is not a *marja-e taghlid*. Dasthgeib has been a member of the Assembly of Expert for two decades now. During the massive crackdown of the protests after the re-election of President Ahmadinejad in 2009, he circulated an open letter amongst the assembly members criticising the handling of the crisis by Khamenei. 'It is not right', Dastgheib maintained in the letter, 'for one person to be in charge of the country.'[27] In

[26] Speech given on Iran's national television, 6 June 1989.

[27] 'Khamenei challenged by Senior Cleric', *Asia Times Online*, 2 November 2010. Available at <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/LK02Ak02.html> [accessed 11 November 2012].

addition, he called an emergency meeting of the Assembly of Experts. Subsequently, his students in Shiraz were harassed, his website was shut down and there were attacks on the Ghoba mosque where Dastgheib has led Friday Prayers for over five decades now. Reassured by the support of most members in the Assembly of Experts, Khamenei dismissed calls for the expulsion of Dastgheib from the assembly deeming it—in truly managerial fashion—not 'very appropriate' to do so.[28]

Khamenei has repeatedly acted as a "prefect" of Ayatollah Khomeini's legacy, rather than a leader in his own right. Exactly because he was not a marja when he was appointed Supreme Leader in 1989, his discourse of power has relied upon "managerial" themes. A quick perusal of the major speeches on his official webpage shows that apart from occasional references to Islamic imagery and symbols, usually slotted at the beginning and the end of the speeches, there is an overwhelming emphasis on functional issues of the state. Terms and themes such as leadership, management, reconstruction, security and national development clearly dominate. In an address to young army cadets at the Imam Ali military academy in December 2005, for instance, Khamenei reminds them that 'military training, observing military discipline, boosting faith and determination' is their major duty.[29] In November 2005, on the occasion of the anniversary of Imam Ali, the first Imam of the Shi'i and the son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammad, Khamenei is equally adamant to stress raison d'état when he cautions that the officials should ensure that there 'is no bribery, administrative corruption, enjoyment of undeserved privileges, waste of working time, disregard for the people, desire to make a fortune ... and no embezzlement of public funds.'[30] In a speech to the residents of Eastern Azerbaijan in February 2007, he addresses the 'youngsters' who 'have become aware of their inherent worth and merit and are looking for scientific knowledge and new discoveries.' In a clear reference to the recurrent theme of national development, Khamenei stresses that 'they are seeking to tread the path to the high summits of progress.' Adamant to remind his audience about the development that Iran has already accomplished, he reiterates in typical fashion that Iran 'benefits from abundant talented human resources that are capable of making considerable progress in various areas of activities, and it is up to government

[28] Ibid.

[29] 'Leader's Address to Army Cadets at Imam Ali Military Academy', 21 December 2005. Available at <http://www.leader.ir/langs/en/index.php?p=bayanat&id=3488> [accessed 12 April 2013].

[30] 'Leader's Statement at the Tehran Friday Prayers', 19 August 2005. Available at <http://www.leader.ir/langs/en/index.php?p=bayanat&id=3476> [accessed 19 March 2013].

officials to make proper use of these valuable resources.'[31] Elsewhere, Khamenei appears more like a minister of education with very particular pedagogical concerns than the Supreme Leader when he 'encourages academics and the officials in charge of universities [to] promote self-confidence among university students. We should have confidence in our national resources and cultural heritage', he adds.

> We should determine the country's needs and scientific priorities and base our educational plans on these two factors. Research and thorough investigation may reveal a number of priorities in the humanities, fundamental sciences, and various areas of experimental sciences. The results of these investigations must be taken into account when doing large-scale planning. Due to the limited amount of resources available and the large number of needs we currently have in the country, we should not spend our time on low-priority projects. Neither should we use our human and financial resources in these cases.[32]

When theological themes are touched upon they are subordinated to the interest of the system in order to deal with the 'complicated economic, financial, political and social problems' facing Muslims today: [33] 'Pundits who enjoy enormous capabilities in Islamic jurisprudence and who have a modern perspective on the current issues must rely on Islamic jurisprudence and its various aspects and double their attempts to clarify different issues and meet these new requirements.'[34] In his emphasis on the interest (*maslahat*) of the system, Khamenei follows the lead of his mentor Ayatollah Khomeini, in particular towards the end of his life when Khomeini enshrined maslahat even more firmly as the principle of the state superseding religious ordinances including the first principles of Islam.[35] Indeed, Khomeini reprimanded Khamenei himself in 1987 when the latter was President reminding him that the state is the most important of God's ordinances and that it can suspend even central commandments of

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[31] 'Leader's Speech to the Residents of the Eastern Azarbaijan Province', 17 February 2007. Available at <http://www.leader.ir/langs/en/index.php?p=bayanat&id=3595> [accessed 12 April 2013]

[32] 'Supreme Leader's Address to Academics', 24 September 2008. Available at <http://www.leader.ir/langs/en/index.php?p=bayanat&id=4058> [accessed 11 April 2013].

[33] 'Hundreds of Ulama, Scholars, Clergymen, and Theology Students of Yazd Province Call on the Leader', 2 January 2008. Available at <http://www.leader.ir/langs/en/index.php?p=bayanat&id=3659> [accessed 8 April 2013].

[34] Ibid.

[35] The Expediency Council entrenched the *maslahat* principle even further. It is mandated to arbitrate disputes between the elected parliament and the Guardian Council in favour of the interest (and stability) of the system. These institutional changes demonstrate the importance of regime survival in the doctrines of the Islamic Republic. This is, of course, exactly in tune with the interest of any other state.

Islam such as prayer, fasting or pilgrimage. Khomeini spoke with the full force of his religious and political authority in a way that Khamenei never really did as Supreme Leader. Addressing Khamenei, he said:

> From your comments during the Friday prayers it would appear that you do not believe it is correct [to characterise] the state as an absolute trusteeship which God conferred upon the noble Prophet, God bless him and his family and grant them salvation, and that the is the most important of God's ordinances and has precedence over all other derived ordinances of God. Interpreting what I have said to mean that the state [only] has its powers within the framework of the ordinances of God contradicts my statements. If the powers of the state were [only] operational within the framework of the ordinances of God, the extent of God's sovereignty and the absolute trusteeship given to the prophet would be a meaningless phenomenon devoid of content.[36]

This type of discourse of power was emblematic for the era of Khomeini and never really returned in this form and shape after his death. It was the particular historical juncture in Iran that allowed him to speak with such immense authority and which lent itself to equating the power of the Iranian state with the holiest tenets of Islam. Aged 85 in 1987, and towards the end of the exhausting eight year war with Saddam Hussein's Iraq, challenged by domestic upheaval and international isolation, for Khomeini the politician the stability of the Islamic Republic must have been pivotal. Hence his increasingly managerial discourse of power and recurrent spasms of systematic violence that continue to be a hallmark of the politics of the faqih until today.

Concluding Reflections

When Khomeini was Supreme Leader, he was at the helm of a young state with nascent bureaucratic structures and a diffuse political system without much institutional depth. In contrast, today Khamenei is at the helm of a state that is by far more professionalised, with a rather more differentiated and experienced under-belly and an inflated public sector that is financially tied into the bureaucracy sustaining the state. Khamenei cannot afford to be arbitrary in the way Khomeini could. His movements have to be measured and strategic. His power is channelled through the diverse anchors scattered around the Iranian body politic from the nodal point of the *beit-e imam* in Tehran and from there to a whole cast of powerful

[36] Quoted in Shirazi, *The Constitution of Iran*, p. 230.

loyalists: “representatives of the Imam” at universities, ministries, and councils, the editors of the two major national newspapers *Keyhan* and *Etelaat* in addition to larger institutions with immense technological power to discipline and punish if necessary. These loci of power zigzag through Iran’s political system and society such as the heads of the economically powerful foundations, the director of the national radio/television network, the Baseej voluntary forces and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). It is no revelation that in particular the IRGC has become increasingly central to the economic and political power sustaining the Islamic Republic in general and the power of the faqih in particular.

At the same time, the office of the Leader continues to be an institution in the competitive political market in Iran that has to be promoted with its own sophisticated PR machinery like a commodity to be sold to a sceptical constituency who are exposed to the competing ideas of influential dissenters, that don’t believe in the project of the Islamic Republic anymore. As a consequence of this pluralistic space that continuously impinges on his sovereignty and legitimacy, Khamenei seems to have chosen to rule as a “prefect” of an unrealisable revolutionary dream, which has turned into a grim reality for many: challenged he may be, but ruling he does.

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